

'In Breath, so it is in Spirit': A Conversation with Ann-Marie Sayers

Interviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



Ann-Marie Sayers (b. 1948), is a Mutsun Ohlone, also known as Costanoan, a word that comes from the Spanish *Costanos*, meaning “coastal people”, who are the original or traditional people of the northern and central coast of California, spanning from the San Francisco Bay south to the Big Sur region and eastward toward the Diablo Mountain Range. She is the Tribal Chairperson of the Ohlone/Costanoan people of Indian Canyon, the Founder and Director of the Costanoan Indian Research and lives at Indian Canyon, nestled in the Gabilan Mountain Range in an area known as Cienega Valley, near Hollister, California. The Ohlone/Costanoan people knew about this secluded valley known as Indian Canyon and fled to it as a refuge in order not to be abducted, as was the practice with Native Americans at that time. Indian Canyon is the only federally recognized “Indian Country” for three hundred miles from Rohnert Park to Santa Barbara and has been the home of the Ohlone/Costanoan people since time immemorial. Ann-Marie Sayers and her daughter, Kanyon Sayers-Roods or known as *Habashkani* (b. 1988), which in Chumash means “Coyote

Woman”, have opened Indian Canyon to all people of indigenous heritage who are in need of land for ceremonies in order to continue and revitalize their sacred traditions.¹ Anne-Marie Sayers frequently participates in State and National meetings to restore ownership of cultural heritage to Native Americans and to educate government officials regarding Native American traditions and rights, including meetings with National Park Service and other State and Federal representatives. This interview was conducted on Monday, September 7, 2015, at Ann-Marie Sayers’s cabin at Indian Canyon.

SBS: *Could you please start by letting audiences unfamiliar with you and your work know more about yourself?*

AMS: Before we begin it is important to mention that this interview is being conducted at the same home-site as that of my great grandfather, and his grandmother and her grandmother and that there is great honor and power in being connected to the land in a sacred way. I am the Tribal Chairperson of the Ohlone/Costanoan people of Indian Canyon and Founder and Director of the Costanoan Indian Research.

For the last thirty or forty years I have monitored archeologically sensitive areas, so that if any Native American cultural material or features such as graves and artifacts, traditional lands or natural resources are found, they are treated with sensitivity and respect. When a burial is disturbed, it is believed that the spirit of the individual is wandering until that individual is reinterred ceremonially. By having Native Americans monitor these archeologically sensitive areas, it will ensure that whatever may be found is treated with the utmost care and dignity. I am living my dream, which is to live to honor my ancestors.

SBS: *Not unlike many Native Americans peoples, you have had to learn how to live in two worlds, one of your own indigenous heritage and the other of the dominant culture. What was this experience like for you?*

AMS: I was born and raised here at Indian Canyon. My umbilical cord is buried here. I left Indian Canyon in my late teens to live in Los

¹ See Ann-Marie Sayers, “NOSO-N—‘In Breath So It Is In Spirit’: The Story of Indian Canyon,” in *The Ohlone Past and Present: Native Americans of the San Francisco Bay Region*, ed. Lowell John Bean (Menlo Park, CA: Ballena Press, 1994), pp. 337-355.

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